DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 454 984 PS 029 614

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TITLE	Fathers, Families, & Child Well-Being in Cameroon: A Review of the Literature.
INSTITUTION	Pennsylvania Univ., Philadelphia. National Center on Fathers and Families.
SPONS AGENCY	Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, MD.
PUB DATE	2000-07-00
NOTE	19p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Center on Fathers and Families, University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education, 3700 Walnut Street, Box 58, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6216. Tel: 215-573-5500; Fax: 215-573-5508; e-mail: mailbox@ncoff.gse.upenn.edu. For full text: http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Children; *Cultural Influences; *Fathers; Foreign Countries; *Parent Child Relationship; Parent Influence; Parent Responsibility; Parent Role; Sex Differences; *Well Being
IDENTIFIERS	Cameroon; Division of Labor (Household)

ABSTRACT

This review discusses fatherhood in Cameroon in the context of anthropological, sociological, and psychological literature. With a focus on the family, the review examines the image and role of the father, the division of labor by gender, and the changing value of the Cameroonian father. The review notes that Cameroonian culture assigns the bulk of family subsistence work to women and siblings. While this culture sanctions the father's authority over the family and its resources, it fails to specify his child care role. Evidence for the effects of father presence on children is preliminary, and considerable work remains to be done. (Contains 30 references.) (Author/KB)

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Fathers, Families, & Child Well-Being in Cameroon: A Review of the Literature

July 2000

by

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Human Development Resource Center (HDRC),
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PREFACE

Not since the 1960s and 1970s—when research in the field was at a peak—have family issues captured as much attention or sparked as much wide-scale debate as they have in recent years. Casting its net to address a variety of problems that fall outside the typical domains of psychology and sociology (where much of the early work was located), research on families is part of a growing interdisciplinary focus which is no longer simply implicated in questions about family development. Rather, the present interdisciplinary focus of the field attempts to respond to massive changes in the needs, structures, poverty levels, and formation patterns of families and the policies that are designed to remedy the increasingly complex problems they face.

A significant and compelling part of research on families over the past 20 years explores the impact of father involvement and father absence on children's development and complements much of the existing research on issues in other areas—e.g., female-headed households, poverty, social welfare, and public policy. In particular, the potential impact of family support legislation, national welfare reform agendas, and persistent systemic problems at local and state levels lend a sense of urgency to the research discussion about father participation in families. What is noticeably lacking in these discussions, however, is a focus on programs that serve fathers and families and the voices of practitioners.

The issues defining and surrounding research and practice on fathers and families are complex. Nested in each issue are multiple layers of questions about the problems facing young fathers, mothers, and families; the needs of programs and the practitioners who work in them; changes in national, state, and local policies; and the nature of the tasks facing society. Although there is substantial discussion about the impact of father absence, research studies provide only modest evidence for the negative consequences of father absence on children and typically attribute these negative effects to reduced family income resulting from separation or divorce. There are only sparse data on families that deviate from "traditional, intact" family forms such as families headed by adolescent or young, adult never-married, and/or poor mothers. Research on families of color, outside of poverty studies, is still conspicuously meager in the knowledge base.

The work of the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) uses the strengths and voids in these research discussions as a launching pad to develop a framework for research, practice, and policy—to promote the building of a field in which the needs of children and families are the core of the discourse and research and practice cohere to craft the language and activities associated with that discourse. NCOFF aims to bring together these issues within a research and collaborative effort on behalf of children and their families.

Established in July 1994 with core funding from The Annie E. Casey Foundation, NCOFF's mission is to improve the life chances of children and the efficacy of families by

facilitating the effective involvement of fathers. Developed in the spirit of the Philadelphia Children's Network's (PCN) motto, "Help the children. Fix the system.", NCOFF seeks to increase and enrich the possibilities for children, ensuring that they are helped and that the system allows for and encourages the participation of fathers in their children's lives. NCOFF shares with PCN and other field activities the premises that children need loving, nurturing families; that mothers and families in general need to be supported in providing nurturance; and that family support efforts should increase the ability of both parents and adults within and outside the biological family to contribute to children's development and well-being.

NCOFF's mission is developed around seven **Core Learnings**. The Core Learnings provide the context for NCOFF's research agenda. This research agenda is intended to support the field in the development, conduct, and advancement of research, practice, and responsive policies. Research activities are designed to synthesize work from multiple disciplines, provide current analyses, and examine emerging conceptualizations in the field. In this and all of its work, NCOFF recognizes that the scope of need in the field requires a variety of approaches and the commitment and collective effort of different communities.

This Monograph is intended to highlight critical and emerging topics in the field that have received minimal attention and that complement issues identified in the NCOFF FatherLit Database, Briefs, critical literature reviews, and research reports. The Database combines citation lists, annotated bibliographies, and abstracts of research articles, reports, and volumes that focus on issues implied in the Core Learnings. All NCOFF documents are written and reviewed by scholars representing multiple disciplines and research interests in fathers and families. Information about the NCOFF Database, the literature reviews and analyses, working papers, and other NCOFF documents and activities is currently available through our website.

Embedded in NCOFF's mission is a vision in which fathers, families, and communities are positioned to ensure the well-being of children and are able to translate their hope and the possibilities that accompany that hope into human and social prosperity. A well-coordinated national effort on fathers and families will give support and a collective voice to programs, encourage research, and contribute to responsive policy formulation. Such a vehicle would provide the appropriate context for experience-sharing among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers; identification of basic research, program, and policy-related issues; surfacing of new research issues; and increased opportunities for communication, cooperation, and collaboration.

Vivian L. Gadsden
Director

Seven Core Learnings

- Fathers care — even if that caring is not shown in conventional ways.
- Father presence matters — in terms of economic well-being, social support, and child development.
- Joblessness is a major impediment to family formation and father involvement.
- Existing approaches to public benefits, child support enforcement, and paternity establishment operate to create systemic obstacles and disincentives to father involvement. The disincentives are sufficiently compelling as to have prompted the emergence of a phenomenon dubbed "underground fathers"—men who acknowledge paternity and are involved in the lives of their children but who refuse to participate as fathers in the formal systems.
- A growing number of young fathers and mothers need additional support to develop the vital skills to share the responsibility for parenting.
- The transition from biological father to committed parent has significant developmental implications for young fathers.
- The behaviors of young parents, both fathers and mothers, are influenced significantly by intergenerational beliefs and practices within families of origin.

The seven Core Learnings are at the heart of NCOFF's agenda for research, practice, and policy and are a framework for the field. They represent the knowledge and experience of practitioners who confront complex problems facing fathers and families and are consistent with research across multiple disciplines. They offer an important lens through which policymakers might learn more about the implications and impact of legislation and policy decisions on the lives of large numbers of fathers, mothers, children, and families. Within them are captured salient issues experienced and felt deeply by a range of fathers and families—from those who are financially secure to those who are the most vulnerable to poverty and hardship.

The Core Learnings were identified immediately prior to NCOFF's inception by front-line practitioners in a series of survey and focus group activities conducted by the Philadelphia Children's Network and NCOFF. Formulated first as seven hypotheses drawn from practitioners' experiences in programs serving fathers and families, each hypothesis was tested against existing published research and policy studies. As each hypothesis was borne out in the literature, it became a Core Learning. A library of information was developed for each. The resultant seven libraries now constitute the NCOFF FatherLit Database and include over 8,000 citations, annotations, and abstracts of research, available online via the Internet and on CD-ROM.

National Center on Fathers and Families

FATHERS, FAMILIES, & CHILD WELL-BEING: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

This review discusses fatherhood in Cameroon in the context of anthropological, sociological, and psychological literature. With a focus on the family, the paper examines the image and role of the father, the division of labor by gender, and the changing value of the Cameroonian father. Cameroonian culture assigns the bulk of family subsistence work to women and siblings. While it sanctions the father's authority over the family and its resources, it fails to specify his childcare role. Evidence for the effects of father presence on children is preliminary, and considerable work remains to be done.

FATHERS, FAMILIES, & CHILD WELL-BEING IN CAMEROON: A Review of the Literature

by A. Bame Nsamenang, Ph.D.

The purpose of this review is to reconstruct the image and role of the father in the context of the Cameroonian family from scanty anthropological, sociological, clinical and impressionistic literature. It is an attempt to paint the image and role of the Cameroonian father in family and child development in the language of current scientific thinking on fatherhood. Relative to European and American research, this is a small-scale review, an overview of the diverse images of fatherhood that are underrepresented in the literature. It is clear that the cultural imperatives and ethnotheories that pertain to family life and the paternal role in Cameroon are structured by worldviews and epistemologies that differ remarkably from the Euro-American versions that frame contemporary fathering research. The paper also endeavors to craft an agenda for future fathering research in Cameroon in anticipation of cross-national collaboration. Although the primary focus of the paper is on fathers, it does not exclude mothers, because "To consider the status of either sex without reference to the other is to distort the reality we are trying to understand" (Fortes, 1950, p. 363).

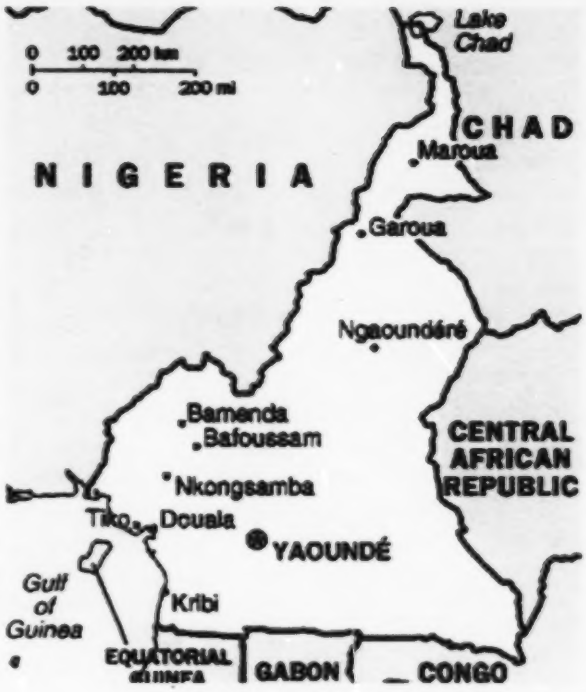
African fathers in general, and Cameroonian fathers in particular, have had little opportunity to be heard by researchers. By contrast, North American and Western European fathers have been studied extensively. The image of the Euro-American father as sensitive, involved and nurturant (e.g., Pleck, 1984; Lamb, 1987) has become a "universal" yardstick against which all other images of the father must be compared. Thus, a Eurocentric image of the father has become the basis for public policy on family and child welfare. This image and the policy guidelines it engenders have been imported uncritically to Cameroon and other sub-Saharan countries. However, the variety of views on parenting in the scientific literature are not always in agreement with the values or reality in Cameroon (Goodnow, 1988; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Given that the literature reviewed here has been presented largely from a Western perspective, the image of fatherhood in Cameroon on its own terms remains to be charted.

The traditional childcare role of the Cameroonian father is nonspecific and not routinized, whereas the mother's is to keep the home, perform other domestic tasks and, more importantly, to oversee and supervise sibling caregiving rather than provide direct childcare herself (Nsamenang, 1992c, p. 426). Thus, the extent of child-to-child caretaking and the socialization of children by other children in Cameroon is substantial – far more extensive and perhaps developmentally more critical than direct maternal or paternal care. The extent to which current Eurocentric theorizing captures the peculiarities of this type of childcare is undoubtedly negligible.

The theoretical anchor-point of this review is that parenting always occurs in a specific ecoculture, defined by geography, history, and the sociocultural system (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1994). Whereas physical environments and the social field provide culturally meaningful experiences to parents, the cultural system offers parents the ideas and scripts that permit and foster the enactment of the parental role. Parents derive their ideas and values from folk wisdom, ontogenetic experience, and expert knowledge (literature and professional persons) (Harkness, Super, & Keefer, 1992). The "directive force" of these sources of ideas and values varies across individuals and societies, depending on such background factors as worldview, social history, education, religion, and place of residence (e.g., Nsamenang & Lamb, 1994), thereby fostering different roles and role changes for fathers over time and across societies. Cultures express the value of the family through the manner in which procreation and child rearing are inserted into family life (Nsamenang, 1996).

To a certain extent, the parental role is the formal expression of the function of the family (Bernard van Leer Foundation, 1984). According to Kessel (1995), family contexts are often very important in determining what is normal and what facilitates and/or hampers effective parenting. The work of Hewlett, Shannon, Lamb, Leyendecker, & Scholmerich (1998) and Nsamenang (1992a, 1992b; Nsamenang & Lamb, 1993, 1994) identifies some of the conduits by which context influences parenting behaviors. The child, the parent, and the social and cultural context constantly interact with and, therefore, influence each other. Scarr (1985) argued cogently that facts do not have an independent existence because the human mind is constructed in a specific cultural context. Thus, a "parental identity" (Goodnow, 1988, p. 289) is created, at least in part, by the cultural [family] context in which parents come to know their roles. Consequently, during ontogeny, Cameroonian males and females develop "a sense of group membership that carries with it some obligation to acquire the kinds of ideas and knowledge appropriate to being a mother or father" Goodnow, 1988, p. 289).

While there is not a solid body of research that covers the range of issues the scientific literature has associated with fathers, some themes that are consistent with trends in the literature are discernible from the scanty available evidence. This review is organized according to these trends in the literature. My first focus is on the family because, as a basic societal unit, the family constitutes an appropriate framework within which to better understand the parental role.



Map of Cameroon
Source: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency

THE FATHER IN THE FAMILY CONTEXT

The family has been universally acknowledged as a natural unit of society and given primary responsibility for the development and well-being of individuals, especially the nurturing and protection of children. The world has not yet discovered a better system to replace the family in this role. Thus, in 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child emphatically stated that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family unit. The family is still the most natural environment for human development and is likely to remain so. It is, however, important not to over-idealize the family, at least in its assumed traditional stable form, since it now seems to be in crisis, as can be seen from statistics worldwide (Bernard van Leer Foundation, 1984). For instance, "In the family system of every human society, incomplete families emerge due to various reasons – demographic, economic or social: such as the death or divorce of a spouse, partition of the family, or migration" (UNESCO, 1991, P. 11). In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, the extended family, while it still exerts considerable influence, is increasingly losing control over individual welfare and family security (Fafunwa, 1980). Broadly perceived, the family is a social institution of two or more persons united by either biological, jural, affiliative, adoptive, or consensual ties (Desai, 1994). Family relationships and household composition vary widely across societies, but in Western cultures nuclear families predominate. The dominant family pattern in Cameroon is the extended or joint family. Although descent is mainly patrilineal, there are a few matrilineal

cultures, like the Kom, and most people maintain close ties to their maternal relatives. Fundamental differences in the paternal role and in father-child interactions are to be expected between societies with matrilineal and patrilineal socialization as well as among industrial, urban, and rural agrarian societies (Greene, Hearn, & Emig, 1996).

In most societies, the ideal way to have healthy and socially connected children is to limit procreation to the marital couple (Feldman-Savelsberg, 1994). In Cameroon, the payment of prestation (a dowery payment) legalizes the marriage contract and establishes a husband's paternity rights. Accordingly, a man who has not paid prestation on a woman forfeits any claim on children born to her (Nsamenang, 1987a). Children born to a woman whose prestation has not been paid belong to the woman's family of origin. The marriage contract ramifies relationships beyond the two spouses to their families and sometimes to their communities. The man and his wife or wives usually are not the only adult members of the household. Adult relatives and friends are sometimes part of the household. In some cases, a man's or woman's children from a previous marriage, pre-marital relationship, or so-called outside partner are also bona fide members of the household (Ellis, 1978). Besides the biological offspring, some households also shelter children of relatives (Hake, 1972). When all the children are added to the adult members of the household, a picture of a very large family emerges. The number of children per West African household ranges from 4.5 in Cameroon to 7.0 in most countries of the region (Ware, 1983). Because family sentiment is passionate, isolated nuclear families are rare. In extended or joint families, children are exposed to multiple adult figures, but in nuclear families, they have a limited set of adult and sibling models. However, the number of single parent (mother-only, and less often, father-only) families, and families with teenage fathers is increasing.

By birth and marriage, Cameroonian fathers and mothers become members of extensive social networks in which kin and supportive friends and neighbors endeavor to promote a sense of community. The language expressing social values and role expectations is not merely rhetorical but morally obligatory, instructing family members to behave and act according to cultural scripts (Nsamenang, 1992a). Children do not belong solely to their biological parents. Kinsmen are expected to be interested and to take responsibility for the care of the children of relatives. They may be subjected to pressure and sanctions, at least the loss of face and the emotional discomfort of not truly belonging to the group, if they depart too widely from the expected roles (Nsamenang, 1989b). In other words, social values anticipate mutual and supportive fellowship involving cooperation in raising children and promoting personal welfare and the security of persons and property (Nsamenang, 1989a). The availability of surrogate fathers in this type of social network probably renders father absence less traumatic than in social systems in which this type of support does not exist.

Although the communitarian spirit and the extended family still thrive, in urban settings distant kin are less often part of the household today than during previous times. However, individuals still maintain contact with a fairly wide circle of kin so that complete isolation of nuclear families is very rare indeed. Most city dwellers still keep some contact with extended members of their families in the rural world. For example, a survey of Nso families (Nsamenang, 1992a) revealed that 46% of households were extended, thus casting some doubt on the sense in the literature of the ubiquity of extended households in traditional West African societies. With only 32.6% of rural families against 60.8% of urban families housing extended members, the extended household system appears to be more of an urban than a rural phenomenon. This trend is consistent with the increasing rate of rural exodus. The stress inherent in urban life, the scarcity of bed space and the need for supportive fellowship in such circumstances induce many a Cameroonian moving into the city to live in the vicinity of kinsmen. One of the most dramatic changes in family life is in sleeping arrangements. Many mothers, fathers and children now sleep in the same house and some mothers and fathers share the same bed, but in previous times they slept in separate houses or huts. These changes have important consequences, albeit uncharted, for all members of the family, whether fathers, mothers or children, but they are more adversely felt by children (Nsamenang, 1992a).

Although the basic forms and functions of the family have survived across millennia of history and cultural evolution, they now co-exist, sometimes competing, with the multiple images from "modernity" (Nsamenang, 1998), particularly in urban centers. The fact that some of the strands that make up the traditional social net have not disappeared bears witness to the ability of the indigenous system to remain flexibly recalcitrant in the face of the modifying influences of modernity (Goheen, 1996). In a certain sense, the indigenous system is adjusting to rather than being replaced by Westernization, as is commonly assumed. Both the continuities and changes are related to the ways in which men, women, and children are coping with the existential demands on family life and the parental role (Nsamenang, 1992a). The benefit or curse of social flux and role changes has not been uniform throughout Cameroon. Various communities and regions did not and still do not have the same family structure and patterns of parental roles and did not react to or are not reacting in the same way nor reflect the same attitudes to the changes. Have the changes affected the image of the father?

THE IMAGE OF THE FATHER

Cameroon, like most sub-Saharan Africa, is a male-dominated society that puts women in a subordinate position to men, although some communities reserve some leadership statuses, like the queen mother and the queen of fertility, to women. But in some domains of life, men and women are eligible for the same kinds of positions, as in prophecy, divination, and indigenous medicine (Nsamenang, 1987a). Most women's decisions, however, affect mainly the womenfolk and the resources they control, whereas most men's decisions bind both men and women and the entire society. The father's position in the community largely determines the social status and lifestyle of his family; his success accords to his wife and children their primary status and prestige (Nsamenang, 1987a). The traditional father filters societal values and expectations to the family by "covering" members of his family and acting "in spatial and social realms outside the kitchen" of his wife (Feldman-Savelsberg, 1994). He is also the one person who sets and enforces standards of behavior and controls family decision-making, including filial marital choices. The father assumes a crucial role in problem solving and protection of the family by exercising a moderating influence on family interactions with the external world. He is expected to be the first person to be consulted or informed of any trouble or major change in a child's life. He can, and often does, call on his children for assistance at any time and can even intervene, without being seen to be intruding, in the affairs of a married child, particularly his son (Nsamenang, 1992a).

The emergent cultural image of the father is that of an esteemed member of the society; the acknowledged head and focal authority of the family. Tchombe's (1993) intergenerational study shows that the power structure of the Cameroonian family varies according to whether the family is nuclear, polygynous, or single parent. Nevertheless, culture backs the father's authority and permits him to literally dominate the personalities of members of the family. A typical Cameroonian father exerts considerable influence and wields enormous control over family resources and is expected to control what happens within the family, to the extent of deciding whether or not his wife or children should engage in activities outside the home (Nsamenang, 1987a). Any deviation from the expectation threatens a man's status, giving him the leeway to handle challenges to his authority as insurrections. In principle, the father's authority continues beyond death (Nsamenang, 1989a) because the ancestors are believed to influence the living long after death (Ellis, 1978; Goheen, 1996). The objective of the father's authority, however, has never been to indulge in self-gratification, but rather to promote the welfare of the family and the best interest of children, although blissful ignorance sometimes thwarts some of his best intentions. In previous times, a father could forbid his erring wife ever to see his children (Green, 1976). But today the due process of law is expected to determine the custody of children in favor of the child's best interest. As far as this process is concerned, if in the past the father's rights were upheld, then justice was thought to be done. But today, the law is concerned with the rights of everyone - men, women, and children.

The primary responsibility of a man's wife was, and in large measure continues to be, to bear him children (especially males). Men have a great desire to father many children. It is believed that a childless man has wasted his life, and therefore men are especially anxious to father children. As a result, Cameroonian men would prefer to die in poverty and be survived by children than to die childless but rich (Nsamenang & Loasebikan, 1981). For Cameroonians, to leave no heirs is the worst calamity that could befall a man (Jahn, 1961).

Culture acknowledges and sanctions the authority of the father over his family, but fails to specify a routine childcare role for him. The apparent scientific neglect and/or devaluation of the role of the Cameroonian father in family life and the development of children stands in sharp contrast to the social visibility and high esteem accorded the father in the culture.

DIVISION OF LABOR

In traditional Cameroon, the conjugal pair is a productive socioeconomic unit in which men and women play different but complementary roles (Nsamenang, 1987a). Children are acknowledged participants in the family subsistence activities, organized such that a horizontal distribution of work by gender is combined with a vertical distribution between adults and the young (Boserup 1970). The division varies greatly among different populations, from the foragers (hunter-gatherers) of the southeastern rainforest, through the farming peoples of the interior plateaus, and nomadic herders in the far north, to the consumer populations in city slums. Men and women do farm work under different constraints and have differential access to resources (Boserup, 1970). It is therefore more reasonable to conceive of a traditional farmer not as an individual male or female but as a man and woman in a symbiotic farming relationship (Hill, 1978). While men and women in some communities contribute equally to subsistence, in most societies women produce the bulk of food crops and provision the household. Agricultural crops are gendered and "male restrictions on female mobility structure access to the market in ways which shift the business advantage to men" (Turrittin, 1988, p. 583).

When men, women, and children worked together for family subsistence, family members were close to each other and children had a clear picture of their parents' lives. Traditional education kept children in contact with parents, their social context and the activities of daily life (Encyclopedie de la Republique unie du Cameroun, 1981), permitting them to learn from their parents' interactions how to develop an identity as a husband/father or wife/mother. But as today's parents have one foot at home and the other outside the home, many children find it difficult to develop a comprehensive image of their parents. This is made worse by the fact that parents do not necessarily have to organize their families to depend entirely on family productivity to satisfy basic needs; they may purchase the requisite goods and services with earnings from paid employment or the sale of crafts and produce. As many of the skills needed for functional citizenship are learned within the context of institutional education, most children are no longer assigned to a life work and trained for it by parents or mentors. The implication of all this is that children and parents are spending longer periods of time away from each other. Of course, this modern lifestyle exerts a heavy toll on family members, particularly the children. For instance, children's participation in intimate family interaction, especially with their fathers, has been drastically curtailed.

In the old gender division of labor, only men's work was considered suitable to be paid. Although most women, particularly rural mothers, worked longer hours in food production and domestic labor and engaged in more physical labor than men (Ware, 1983), their work was not defined as labor that could be paid. But today, women are increasingly being drawn in unprecedented numbers out of the home and farms into the world of paid work. Some women have even taken up occupations that were once reserved for men. The participation of both men and women in the paid labor force has wrought significant changes in family life, particularly in the image and role of the father. The father is increasingly becoming simply one of the family instead of its undoubted head and focal authority. Father's authority is still considerable, nevertheless, but his powers are eroding rapidly as other members of the family are gaining in status and independence by virtue of personal

achievements. As many of today's children may increasingly be in possession of "the power of knowledge in the face of their parents' helplessness" (Feldman-Savelsberg, 1994, p. 469), fathers are finding it difficult to act as guides and companions to their children. The role of the husband as protector has also declined. For example, if a wife is threatened or attacked she may resort to the security service rather than depend on her husband (who may actually be the aggressor). The father's resources are no longer the sole means for family survival because some women are now earning higher incomes or have access to better resources than their husbands (Nsamenang, 1987a). Because tradition places the responsibility to feed the family on the mother, the Bangante (a Bamileke kingdom in the Grassfields of Cameroon), like the Cameroonian father (Feldman-Savelsberg, 1994), is not and has never really been the sole provider. As a result, mothers, especially in polygamous homes, do not expect to be totally maintained by their husbands. Instead, they find independent ways to support themselves and their children (Nsamenang, 1992a). It is not that Cameroonian men are uninterested in the welfare of their families. Rather they are not traditionally held responsible for the family's daily food security (Goheen 1989).

THE PATERNAL ROLE

Family patterns and the ways in which cultures specify the roles of men and women show a great deal of variability which, in turn, introduces variation in patterns of mothering and fathering. The welfare of African children depends on the niches in which they live rather than solely on their parents.. Cameroonian children occupy a wide variety of ecocultural niches that are high on mutual support but low on centrally organized social security services. A minority of the children grow up as members of the modern city elite, while the vast majority inhabit urban squatter settlements and rural peasant communities. The risk of mortality during childhood is considerable for a number of political, climatic, and economic reasons (Nsamenang & Dawes, 1998). Many deaths are caused by malnutrition and a lack of immunization and health care facilities (Nsamenang, 1992a). Many children do not complete primary school, and many fail due to the psychological consequences of malnutrition and the adverse conditions of the schools themselves. Frequently the demand on children's labor does not mesh well with schooling based on European timetables (Serpell, 1993). This results in a conflict of interest between the demands of schooling and those of family survival. Patterns of schooling also reflect the gender divisions of Cameroonian communities. For instance, whereas 44.9% of males and 37.3% of females receive primary education, only 14.6% of males and 8.9% of females receive secondary education. A main reason for this is that girls bear a heavier burden of both the household activities and the care of siblings than boys (Nsamenang, 1992c).

Fathers play a critical role in childhood niches, not so much in the direct care of children, but more through the influence they exert on the niches, even when absent. Fathers are an important link between children and the social network of kin and neighbors, a group whose importance is reflected in the care of the child growing up in a sociological field of kin. In this field, fathers and mothers play different roles in educating and socializing children. The educational and socializing roles of fathers center mainly on their status and activities as the central authority of the family, the family's life-line to the world outside the home, and the family's economic support and protector (Nsamenang, 1987a). The principal role of mothers revolves around societal reproduction comprising childcare, home keeping, food production and feeding the family. Mothers are responsible for uninterrupted care of and attachment to children, particularly infants. Although mothers make most routine decisions concerning childcare and domestic chores, they defer major family decisions such as children's education and use of resources to their husbands. Mothers tend to handle minor discipline problems more often than do fathers because of their greater availability and access to children. In general, the father intervenes only when the mother's efforts at discipline fail or when crises erupt. But the culture does not sanction paternal involvement in routine childcare. A father who is tender and nurturant toward infants and young children, like the Aka forager father (Hewlett et al., 1998), is regarded as effeminate or otherwise behaving

inappropriately (Nsamenang, 1987a). Since the routine care of infants and toddlers in most ethnic communities traditionally falls on mothers, fathers tend to maintain some emotional distance from children during their early years of life. Until they are about 4 years of age or so, boys and girls are tended to by mothers (Nsamenang, 1992c), with distinctions regarding dress, cuddling and expectations of gender-appropriate behaviors.

Across cultures and ecologies, some fathers provide extensive resources and attention to children, but others provide little or nothing (Hewlett, 1992). What is the father's and mother's responsibility or role in childcare in Cameroon? The allocation of resources and attention to children in many a Cameroonian ethnic community is determined by age, gender, generation, and laterality, that is, whether the child's rights derive more from the father's or mother's lineage (Nsamenang, 1989a). The way in which fathers and mothers conceive of children and development influences the way they raise them. The socialization values of Nso parents in northwest Cameroon, for example, shows greater agreement than disagreement, but there is significant intra-cultural variation among various parental cohorts by religion (African theology, Christianity, and Islam), generation (grandparental vs. parental), habitat (rural vs. urban), gender (fathers vs. mothers), and educational history (schooled vs. unschooled) (Nsamenang and Lamb, 1995). Childcare and education in Cameroon are organized around family life. The family was and still is the primary institution within which men, women, and children sustain the survival and well-being of members and the society (Nsamenang, 1992a). This brings into focus the pertinence of Sharp's (1970) warning against the abrupt disruption of the traditional African family that is still the best guarantee of the African child's welfare and education. This warning becomes more relevant in the face of increasing rather than decreasing levels of abject poverty and inadequate or poorly provided public services. For instance, the beneficiaries of the Cameroon family security scheme are workers in paid employment. This policy discriminates against and excludes the large majority of the most needy segments - non-working and peasant families. The extent to which fathers on the scheme use direct cash payments for the benefit of the focal population – children and their mothers – is in doubt (Nsamenang, 1992a). For example, working fathers are granted a 3-day paid paternity leave on the birth of their babies, but many of them use it for socializing with friends, ostensibly in celebration of the child's birth (Nsamenang, 1992c).

In line with societal expectations, fathers raise their children to be respectful and obedient and to succeed at school (Nsamenang, 1992b; Nsamenang & Lamb, 1994). Paternal concern with school success, though not strictly an indigenous motive, derives from a cultural valuation of social competence. To attain this goal, fathers, particularly rural fathers, tend to be stern and strict in training. Accordingly, fathers are quite liberal in the use of punishment (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1993), which perhaps explains why many mothers sometimes invoke the image of absent fathers to erring children (Nsamenang, 1992b).

Parents are struggling to handle the conflict between traditional and modern directives regarding parenting, a state of affairs that is confusing for many parents. This scenario has been complicated by social and economic demands that require men, especially urban fathers, to spend more time away from home rather than doing things with children to earn the label of "good father." Consequently, some children are growing up with only vague ideas of what a father really is. Bronfenbrenner (1974) sees this trend as a betrayal of children.

One outcome of faulty or inadequate fathering is an increasing incidence of child psychopathology (Nsamenang, 1987a). The competing demands of traditionalism and modernity are also taking their toll on the marital couple. In the case of the Bamenda Grassfields, Nsamenang (1987b) reported that mothers and fathers have accused each other of infidelity, abdication of parental responsibilities, and excessive consumption of beer. Whereas mothers claimed that fathers no longer provided adequate security to the family, fathers complained that their wives had become uncaring, marketing away the bulk of the harvest and squandering the money in luxury clothing. Although both fathers and mothers acknowledged the economic necessity of women's paid employment, they differed on how the proceeds should be used. While men wished

to uphold the traditional precept of controlling the use of their wives' wealth (Kaberry 1952; Nsamenang 1987a), most of the mothers insisted on using their money themselves. Most men were threatened by their wives' gains in economic independence and loathed this trend (Nsamenang, 1987b).

Basic questions about the role of the father remain unanswered. For example, what exactly can the father do to earn from his family and children the status of a good father? One plausible way to handle the challenge facing parents as increasing numbers of mothers are spending more time away from children on wage labor, is to forge new conceptions of the family and the parental role. This may be facilitated, not impaired, by a revision of the gender division of family responsibility necessitating an increase in paternal involvement in the domestic sphere and direct care and supervision of children. What are the possible implications and repercussions on parents, children, families, and the society of increased father involvement in childcare? What satisfaction can fathers derive from involvement and how does it affect the marital couple and the welfare of families, particularly the well-being of children?

THE FATHER'S ROLE IN CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Parental beliefs and values "play a directive role in shaping the developmental niche and consequently the development of [children's] behaviors" (Super et al., 1994, p. 3). The value parents place on the child determines how they perceive children and how they raise boys and girls. For example, more Nso mothers than fathers supported the notion of girls being the weaker sex and the need for protection of girls. Accordingly, more mothers than fathers endorsed the differential socialization of boys and girls (Nsamenang, 1992b). Whereas Nso mothers were more likely than fathers to endorse the discipline of children by beating, fathers were more likely than mothers to report that the experience of adversity could help children (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1995).

It seems reasonable, on the basis of all this, to expect that variations in family patterns may shape parental roles. In fact, parenting patterns vary according to cultural values and the parenting ethos they engender (Nsamenang, 1996). Acuna and Rodrigo (1994) have discussed how children's activities are related to parental beliefs. Nsamenang and Lamb (1994, 1995) have explained how the socialization values of Nso fathers and mothers, particularly expectations and strategies for providing reinforcement, influence the anticipatory socialization of children into adult roles and their guided participation in the work of the family and community.

The values of Cameroonian parents create the conditions that permit children to spend more time within the peer culture than in parent-child dyads, as is typical in other cultures. Consequently, most toddlers in Cameroon learn more from each other than from their parents or other adults (Nsamenang, 1992c; Nsamenang & Lamb, 1994, 1995). In this way, the responsibility for the development of toddlers falls less on parents, especially fathers, who "raise" them and more on children themselves "coming up" (Heath, 1983) or emerging within the peer culture (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1995). Within this culture, knowledge and skills filter from adults through older children as they engage in joint explorations and problem solving (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1995). Parental values thus indirectly prime or socialize the norms that foster children's self-emergence and creativity.

A prototype of this version of development is the evocation in *The African Child of Camara* Laye's (1977) boyhood and emergence into adulthood in rural and urban Guinea and France. This form of indirect parental influence is effective because a mechanism of self-regulation exists within the peer culture due to the power inherent in the expectations and directives of absent parents whose direct intervention is no longer needed (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1995; Zempleni-Rabain, 1973). Maccoby (1992) confirmed indirect parental impact on children in her review of the socialization literature when she stated that events that occur in the context of parent-child interaction affect children's social behavior in other settings and at later times. We thus feel that most Cameroonian fathers influence their children indirectly.

Preliminary empirical evidence on Cameroonian fathers indicates that they are significant to children, even when absent

(Nsamenang, 1992b). For example, Nsamenang and Laosebikan (1981) described how pathogenic patterns of fathering contributed to psychopathology and academic under-achievement in children. Their therapeutic regimen involved interesting fathers of the disturbed children in therapy and fostering cordial father-child interactions. Their report reveals that the prognosis for children of involved fathers was better than that of children whose fathers did not participate in the therapy. Some of the participating fathers even wished they could relate more intimately to their children (Nsamenang & Laosebikan, 1981). Nsamenang (1987a) has presented case studies of adolescents who developed emotional disturbances consequent to uncertain paternity and father absence. In one case the adolescent's mother refused to disclose his father's identity; the teenager progressively became emotionally unstable. In another case, a father was absent during his son's childhood and although he was available during his teen years, the adolescent was disturbed by the discrimination he experienced in his polygamous home in which his mother was not one of the wives.

The author (Nsamenang, 1983) carried out an intervention study to improve the quality of fathering experienced by a group of adolescent students in Bamenda. Findings indicate that the intervention package, Father Involvement Training (FIT), introduced significant differences in fathering between the experimental and control fathers and a concomitant improvement in the emotional adjustment of the adolescents whose fathers received the experimental treatment. The experimental teenagers further reported more cordial and humane interactions with their fathers than did the adolescents in the control situation. Furthermore, a finding from a program that trains "lay counselors" to provide psychosocial support to HIV/AIDS victims and their families indicates that participating fathers claimed that the experiential nature of the program has sensitized them to become more responsive to their children (Nsamenang & Lukong, 1998).

Although the Cameroonian father has somehow been forgotten by social scientists, he is by no means an insignificant figure in the lives of his family and children. The evidence for paternal effect is preliminary and more empirical work in this direction remains to be done so that interventions to improve the quality of fathering can be effected.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS: CRAFTING A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE

Childcare in Cameroon, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa, is not a parental prerogative; it is a social and collective enterprise in which parents and kin, including older siblings, peers, and sometimes neighbors and friends, are active participants (Nsamenang, 1992a). The welfare of the Cameroonian family does not depend solely on the father; traditionally, Cameroonian mothers and their children are active contributors to family security and welfare. The childbearing and childrearing literature typically locates the primary responsibility for childcare with mothers. But in Cameroon as in much of West Africa, children spend more time and engage in perhaps more significant interactions in the care and guidance of other siblings than in other cultures (Nsamenang, 1992c; Weisner, 1989). Nsamenang (1992a), for instance, has reported that 67.2% of Nso girls and 65.2% of boys participated in giving care to younger siblings.

The family scene in Cameroon today is in total flux, and most people are trying to reconcile traditional ways with the modern norms of family life. In some cases, children are more knowledgeable about modern lifestyles than their illiterate or less educated parents. This is confusing both parents and children and making it more difficult for many parents to be role models or to teach their children "the correct ways of the world." The continuity and change in fatherhood and motherhood would be better illustrated if new lines of research could record the authentic voices of fathers alongside those of mothers. Although it is obvious that human males and females differ in biological features, efforts to understand maternal and paternal behaviors have focused predominantly on maternal characteristics. Males have generally not been included in parenting research by design and therefore have not been

asked about their family life and parental roles. Whenever men have become the focus of research, non-Western men, poor and minority men in Western societies, and unmarried fathers who do not live with their children are rarely heard. This has produced very biased information about men in general and fathers in particular (Greene, Hearn, & Emig, 1996), thereby drawing a lopsided picture of human parenting. Further bias in the portrait emerges from the fact that the questions asked of male respondents often follow a female template, thus failing to capture adequately the male experience. Even when the right questions have been asked of men, studies often fail to elicit valid responses because the instrument and the methods of gathering information do not address the experiences of the respondents. The implication is that cross-cultural studies require a variety of data collection techniques and a conceptualization that is sufficiently sensitive to the experiences of all fathers, especially the different roles and expectations for fathers as providers, protectors, educators and markers of child development across various cultures (Greene, Hearn, & Emig, 1996).

In order to craft a national and cross-national research agenda to address the huge diversity in human fatherhood, family patterns, and norms for child well-being for the next millennium, a learning posture and creative vision are required. This should begin with a willingness to accept the limitations of current perspectives and an openness that permits attention to the experiences of all fathers in all contexts. Researchers would benefit by not ignoring Wright's advice "to look for alternatives to the traditional views, not so that those views may be necessarily displaced, but so that we may come to wider, fuller understanding" (Wright, 1984, p. xiv) of the variety that exists to be discovered. We need to look at all forms of the family and fatherhood, no matter how diverse, and learn what we may from them; even if we learn that a certain view is worthless, we would have, in the true spirit of science, learned something important (Wright, 1984). A learning posture renders absurd the a priori conclusion that certain ideas and/or lifestyles, say the African, are "more or less wrong about the facts" of life (Riesman, 1986). It is in this light that the tendency to present Western ideas as the only rational and universally valid ones (Tangwa, 1996) becomes ethnocentrism, par excellence. With a learning posture, the diversity in fatherhood is not regarded as an aberration in search of a solution, but natural variation in human parenthood. Genuine and respectful collaboration in cross-national research will not permit one group, say, Western researchers, to determine a priori what is to be considered standard. The Euro-American image of the father should cease to be used as the standard for comparison of all experiences of fatherhood and on which to base fathering policy.

The acceptance of the non-Western or peculiar nature of African or other developing world family patterns and modes of fathering on their own terms is a sine qua non for genuine and respectful cross-national research collaboration. A mere acceptance that other cultures can make a contribution in the field accords an inclusive frame of reference that permits the conceptualization of fatherhood in its global diversity. The effort will become more fruitful only if the research and donor communities in the developed world accept and integrate researchers in the developing world as co-partners, albeit with poorer resource-bases and an inhospitable research environment (Nsamenang, 1995), into collaborative research teams. At the same time, it is worth noting that the scientific ethos is a Western intellectual attitude to which developing world psychologists are acculturating.

An appropriate research agenda ought to include an exploration of the extent to which traditional family and parental values are being renounced or the degree to which they have changed or are changing. Other areas of research focus of considerable interest are father-child interactions (in societies with matrilineal and patrilineal socialization), children's perceptions of their fathers, how paternal involvement affects marital interactions, and adolescent fatherhood and role transitions. Additional worthwhile topics for research include taboos, patterns of fathering in adult-centered versus child-centered communities, individualistic and interdependent societies, nuclear and extended families, and multiple forms of fatherhood, including but going beyond the biological father to include secondary and surrogate fathers, and the circumstances that affect fathering.

It is useful to include fathers and mothers of diverse ages, backgrounds, and socioeconomic status within an applied and collaborative interdisciplinary but participatory research framework (Nsamenang, 1996). The way to improve the accuracy of addressing all versions of the fathering experience, especially in Cameroon, is to borrow wisely and gain usefully from an extended family of theoretical and methodological traditions in relevant disciplines rather than from a single disciplinary tradition (Walsh, Tobin, & Graue, 1993). Progress would be made if the search for relevant theories and appropriate methodologies focused on creatively constructing "a new understanding of theory in close proximity" (Valsiner, 1997, p. viii) to fathering in context.

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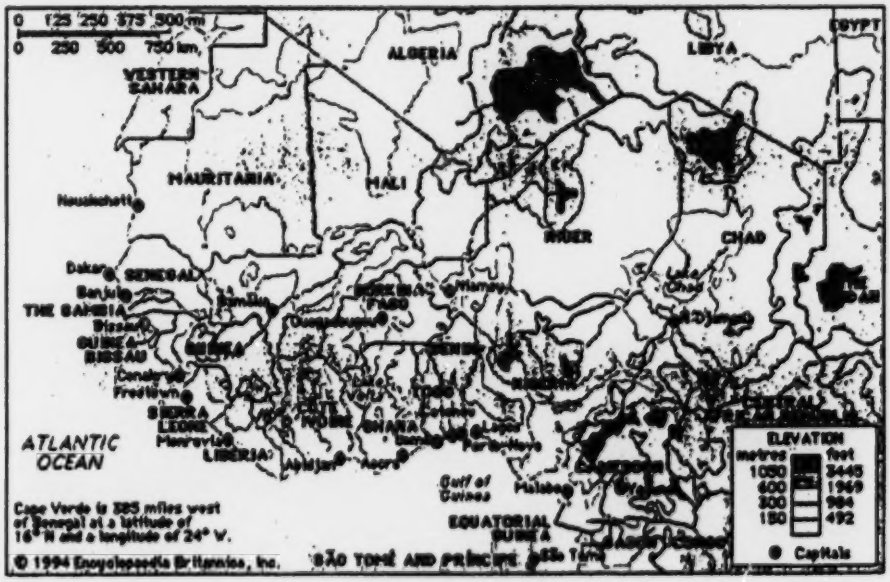

Map of Northwest Africa
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